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## NEWS FOCUS

# The Wrong Way To Sell SALT

By Cord Meyer

WASHINGTON — President Carter and his secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, are so committed to the achievement of a SALT agreement that they are being disconcertingly slow to criticize Soviet misbehavior.

With the signing of SALT II as their overriding objective, both men have tended to overlook abundant evidence of Soviet involvement in Iran and Cambodia.

As Iran slides into chaos, Carter has warned Brezhnev not to intervene. But he has politely refrained from calling the Russians to account for the inflammatory broadcasts of their clandestine radio. Beaming from Baku inside the Soviet Union, the Russians have been calling in Persian for the immediate expulsion of all Americans from Iran.

The Soviet support of the Vietnamese assault on Cambodia was so blatant that even communist Rumania was compelled to protest bitterly the Russian role. However, Vance has claimed that the evidence of Soviet involvement is not yet clear and Carter has made only equivocal comments.

Carter and Vance have given similar explanations for their reticence in recent interviews. Vance said he was concerned by rising anti-Soviet sentiment in the United States. He said he would "resign tomorrow" rather than participate in reviving the passions of the Cold War.

For his part, Carter said he was "concerned about the growth of anti-Soviet sentiment particularly among the elites and experts." However, he feels reassured by polls that show a majority to be with him on the arms control issue. The implication of these statements is that the American public should not be exposed to too much unpleasant Soviet reality for fear of provoking irrational overreaction.

IN PRACTICE, THIS self-imposed restraint leads to an extreme version of Vance's familiar position that there must be no "linkage" between SALT and Soviet behavior on other issues. Not only will the United States refuse to make a SALT agreement conditional on cessation of Soviet interventions, but it will go further and refrain from strenuously objecting to such moves in order to keep the SALT dialogue going.

However, geopolitical reality has a way of intruding upon the rarefied atmosphere in which the two superpowers conduct their SALT negotiations. Ironically, even as Carter presses

for an arms control agreement, the Iranian revolt has endangered two ground sites operated by American intelligence on Iran's border with Russia. Information collected from these sites is crucial to American ability to verify that the Soviets comply with SALT limitations on the number of missile warheads.

At great expense and considerable delay, alternative intelligence collection systems can be devised to recover part of the vital information that would be lost. But there is no really adequate substitute for the line-of-sight coverage of Soviet test ranges provided by the mountainous terrain on Iran's border.

The Soviets will celebrate the closing of this window on their research and development, but the American critics of SALT have been given a new and serious reason for questioning the adequacy of our verification procedures.

AS THE CARTER administration begins to realize the strength of Senate opposition to SALT II, there is a growing tendency to portray the defeat of the treaty in apocalyptic terms. In reality, SALT is at best a useful method of placing a verifiable limit on certain types of strategic armament, and reasonable men can differ on whether it is wise to accept the specific terms of the proposed treaty.

But Carter has begun to argue that rejection by the Senate will destroy the credibility of the American presidency, "deal a severe blow" to U.S.-Soviet relations and do irreparable damage to America's peaceful reputation in the world. With these rhetorical excesses, Carter is taking a huge gamble. If the treaty is rejected, he will have given the Soviets a powerful propaganda weapon by exaggerating the implications of defeat.

Mounting suspicion of Soviet intentions at home and growing concern among our allies abroad are not invented by an elitist cabal of experts, as Carter has suggested. They are the direct result of increasing Soviet military strength and the adventurous uses to which it has been put.

Carter's State of the Union message was strong in its support of SALT but had not one word to say about the expansion of Soviet power in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Carter can't sell SALT by ignoring this geopolitical reality. The Senate debate on ratification will force him to explain what he intends to do about the steady erosion of American influence.

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